POLITICS & POLICY

Elon Musk's no good, very bad meme shows how out of touch he is with political reality

It's not uncommon for people to delude themselves into believing that their preferred political side is the reasonable one. That doesn't make it less worrying.

Elon Musk, founder of SpaceX, speaks during the Satellite 2020 at the Washington Convention Center in Washington, D.C. on Mar. 9. Brendan Smialowski / AFP via Getty Images file

April 30, 2022, 7:44 AM EDT

By Parker Molloy, Chicago-based media critic

Billionaire and maybe-Twitter buyer Elon Musk sure loves memes. Sometimes they make sense, sometimes they don't (and usually he's not the one making them.) Thursday's viral meme certainly fell into the latter two categories.

The argument being made here is a simple one: From 2008 to 2021, the political left moved even more to the left, while the right remained in the same exact spot. This *I didn't change! It was the left who left me!* attitude is a pretty common trope among center-right types, but it's simply not true. While perhaps comforting, there is plenty of empirical evidence to refute the core claim.

Obviously, political whims shift over time, and parties may flip-flop on individual issues. But broadly speaking, the right has been shifting to the extremes for decades. Can you imagine the modern mainstream Republican reaction to President Richard Nixon's decision to create a brand new federal agency to protect the environment? Or how about President Ronald Reagan's decision to offer amnesty to nearly three million undocumented immigrants? How about President George W. Bush's speech in which he said the words "Islam is peace" – even if his administration's actions said otherwise?

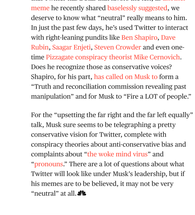
Look at how quickly the Republican Party turned against 2008 presidential nominee Sen. John McCain and 2012 presidential nominee (and now senator) Mitt Romney, who have both been slammed as RINOs ("Republicans in Name Only"). The face of the party is now represented by the likes of Rep. Lauren Boebert, Madison Cawthorn and Marjorie Taylor Greene. Arguably the highest-profile non-congressional Republican right now (besides Trump) is Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who has spent the last year passing a dizzying array of bills designed to cater specifically to the far-right.

The face of the party is now represented by the likes of Rep. Lauren Boebert, Madison Cawthorn and Marjorie Taylor Greene.

As for Democrats? Well, they've definitely moved to the left on a few key issues. For instance, the party's stance on LGBTQ rights has certainly shifted in the past several years, even if that hasn't resulted in a ton of LGBTQ-inclusive policies being implemented at the federal level. (Meanwhile Republicans like DeSantis have recently gone on the attack, with legislation like the so-called "Don't Say Gay" bill targeting LGBTQ teachers and youth.)

Democrats have also, generally speaking, shifted to the left on sentencing reform and police accountability, even if, again, that hasn't resulted in a ton of *policy* to reflect this stance. For all the thought pieces discussing whether cities should "defund the police," city officials in both red and blue states are once again pouring money into law enforcement. Elected Democrats still tend to be pretty moderate on most issues – especially when compared to "leftist" positions abroad.

To take another example, while other countries have government-funded health care, the U.S. remains tied to its private-market insurance industry. As I've written in the past, the positions typically held by Democrats that get labeled by the press as "extreme" or "leftist" – such as bans on high-capacity firearm magazines, universal background checks on gun purchases, support for LGBTQ rights and taxing the ultra-rich – aren't actually that extreme. These policies tend to be pretty popular with the general public, which is something you can't exactly say about Republicans and their crusade to ban books, restrict abortion rights and attack LGBTQ people.



Perhaps, as others such as The Washington Post's Will Oremus have said, it could be that this is just how Musk (and others) sees the world around them: not in the form of actual policy but through the lens of the culture wars.

Recommended

GIFT GUIDES
27 gift baskets that'll arrive just in time for Mother's Day

GIFT GUIDES
Make your mom's sparkle with these 40 jewelry gifts

And generally speaking, it makes sense that having curated a media diet heavy on the misinformation peddled by Fox News and co. or surrounding yourself with pundits screaming about how trans people are supposedly ruining everything good in the world could warp your perspective. If you spent the summer of 2020 being inundated by Fox News footage of Black Lives Matter protests, you might genuinely think that the left is out of control. This perception, however, simply doesn't match reality.

It's not uncommon for people to delude themselves into believing that their preferred political side is the reasonable one and that it's the *other* side that's out of control, as Musk has. That being said, if Musk actually believes the meme – which was created last year by Colin Wright, who writes a Substack mostly about gender and earlier this week attacked the Trevor Project, an LGBTQ youth suicide prevention organization, as part of the ongoing right-wing smear campaign targeting LGBTQ adults *and* children – that's more worrying. After all, Musk is likely to soon control Twitter, a tool which, for all its faults, still wields power.

We want to hear what you THINK. Please submit a letter to the editor.
Please let us know what you THINK by submitting a letter to the editor
NBC News · Jul 17, 2019

If, as Musk has stated, he wants to have a "politically neutral" platform, which he defines as "upsetting the far right and the far left equally" (that is not what "politically neutral" actually means), and he believes that Twitter has a bias that favors the left, as another meme he recently shared baselessly suggested, we deserve to know what "neutral" really means to him. In just the past few days, he's used Twitter to interact with right-leaning pundits like Ben Shapiro, Dave Rubin, Saagar Enjeti, Steven Crowder and even one-time Pizzagate conspiracy theorist Mike Cernovich. Does he recognize those as conservative voices? Shapiro, for his part, has called on Musk to form a "Truth and reconciliation commission" regarding past manipulation" and for Musk to "Fire a LOT of people."

For the "upsetting the far right and the far left equally" talk, Musk sure seems to be telegraphing a pretty conservative vision for Twitter, complete with conspiracy theories about anti-conservative bias and complaints about "the woke mind virus" and "pronouns." There are a lot of questions about what Twitter will look like under Musk's leadership, but if his memes are to be believed, it may not be very "neutral" at all.

Subscribe to the THINK newsletter

ReTHINK the news cycle with timely op-eds, in-depth analyses and personal essays delivered weekly to your inbox.

Enter your email

SIGN UP

THIS SITE IS PROTECTED BY RECAPTCHA PRIVACY POLICY & TERMS OF SERVICE

Parker Molloy

Parker Molloy is a Chicago-based media critic and author of The Present Age newsletter.

© 2022 NBC UNIVERSAL